King Hochschild's Hoax

An absurdly deceptive book on Congolese rubber production is better described as historical fiction.

By Prof. Dr. Bruce Gilley
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For the past 25 years, the idea of the Congo has been closely linked in the Western imagination to the 1998 book *King Leopold's Ghost* by the American journalist Adam Hochschild. The book is widely assigned in high schools and colleges, and it regularly tops best-seller lists in colonial, African, and Western history. Hochschild has become a sort of king of the Congo, or at least of its history. The book is reflexively cited by reputable scholars in their footnotes any time they wish to assert that it is "well known" and "beyond doubt" that sinister men in Europe wrought havoc in Africa over a century ago. Any discussion of the Congo, or of European colonialism more generally, invariably begins with the question: "Have you read *King Leopold's Ghost*?"

I have read it. And I can declare that it is a vast hoax, full of distortions and errors both numerous and grave, a few of which I will detail in this short essay. Some people might view "King Hochschild's Hoax," as we might call it, as an empowering fable for modern Africans at the expense of the white man. But its debilitating effects on Africa, and on the Congo in particular, make the opposite more nearly the case. It is a callous and negligent *chicotte* (hippo whip) lash on the backs of all black Africans, narcissistic guilt porn for white liberals at the expense of the African. The Congolese

lawyer Marcel Yabili calls it “the greatest falsification in modern history,” a compliment of sorts, I suppose.

Hochschild’s book is a history of the private domain of the Belgian King Léopold II in the Congo river basin that was founded in 1885 and then handed over to the Belgian government in 1908. The book alternates between diabolical accounts of Léopold and hagiographic accounts of three of his critics: the British campaigner E.D. Morel, the British diplomat Roger Casement, and the black American missionary William Henry Sheppard. The narrative style is dark and conspiratorial, from the initial plans for the domain to its final dissolution. All along, Hochschild’s aim is to elevate the story into one of the greatest evils ever perpetrated by the West upon the Rest.

There have been two documentary films about Hochschild’s fable, both travesties of art as well as fact. But the worst is yet to come. A dramatized Hollywood version by the American directors Ben Affleck and Martin Scorsese, co-produced with the singer and activist Harry Belafonte, has been in development since 2019. The history of the Congo might have survived one gut punch from California (Hochschild did his research entirely at libraries in the state and teaches at Berkeley). But once Hollywood weighs in on the matter, history as such will be impossible. Before that happens, let’s set the record straight and end this most malicious form of imperial plunder.

The first and biggest deceit at the heart of *King Leopold’s Ghost* is the attempt to equate Léopold’s “État indépendant du Congo” or EIC (long mistranslated as the Congo Free State) with Western colonialism. Yet the EIC was a short-term solution to the *absence* of colonial government in the Congo river basin. The deal was simple: Léopold was to open the area to trade and eliminate endemic Arab slave empires and African tribal wars. In return, he hoped to bring glory to the Belgian people for having done what no other European ruler dared (one in three Europeans who traveled to the Congo died, usually of illness). The EIC had nothing to do with the Belgian government. To the extent that limited abuses and misrule occurred in some parts of his domain (discussed below), this was a direct result of its *not* being controlled by a European state. As no less than Morel

insisted (not quoted by Hochschild), “Let us refrain from referring to the Congo as a Belgian colony, let us avoid writing of ‘Belgian misrule.’”

In a pattern of misrepresentation that is repeated on other issues, Hochschild at first mentions this inconvenient fact and then proceeds to say the opposite for the entirety of the book. The fiefdom “was shared in no way with the Belgian government,” which “had no legal authority over [Léopold] as ruler of the Congo,” he alerts readers. Yet not only the subtitle of the book but laced throughout are constant smears against European colonialism. The book shows “colonial brutality” and “the wrongs of colonial rule” resulting from the “logical consequence of the very idea of colonialism.”

This distortion is no mere technicality. Rather, it is the central lie of *King Leopold’s Ghost*. The freelance EIC had at its peak just 1,500 administrative officers and about 19,000 police and soldiers for an area one third the size of the continental United States. As such, it exerted virtually no control over most areas, which were in the hands either of Arab slave-traders and African warlords, or of native soldiers nominally in the employ of Belgian concession companies without a white man for a hundred miles. Hochschild’s description of the EIC as “totalitarian” is bizarre, as is his claim that Léopold exerted a “framework of control…across his enormous realm.” If only this were true.

That is why Congo reformers like Morel, much to the annoyance of Hochschild, advocated either German or British colonization of the area. Morel’s view, according to Hochschild, speaking *ex cathedra* from the hallowed seat of modern California, “seems surprising to us today” and was among his “faults” and “political limitations.” Quite the opposite. The moment the Belgians colonized the Congo in 1908, a miraculous improvement was noted on all fronts. Seeking to debunk colonialism, Hochschild’s book demonstrates the opposite. This is the first and biggest lie at the heart of *King Leopold’s Ghost*.

The second, but more visible, untruth is the claim that for 23 years, EIC officials throughout the territory sponsored

violent actions such as chopping off hands to force natives to collect rubber, leaving millions dead in a horror that should be directly compared to the Holocaust. There are about a dozen little cheats here, one embedded in the other like Russian nesting dolls.

Here are the facts. By 1891, six years into the attempt to build the EIC, the whole project was on the verge of bankruptcy. It would have been easy for Léopold to raise revenues by sanctioning imports of liquor that could be taxed or by levying fees on the number of huts in each village, both of which would have caused harm to the native population. A truly “greedy” king, as Hochschild repeatedly calls him, had many fiscal options that Léopold did not exercise.

Instead, he did what most other colonial governments and many post-colonial ones in Africa did: He imposed a labor requirement in lieu of taxes. In a small part of the upper Congo river area, he declared an EIC monopoly over “natural products,” including rubber and ivory, that could be harvested as part of the labor requirement to pay for the territory’s government. From 1896 to 1904, an EIC company and two private companies operated in this area, which covered about 15 percent of the territory and held about a fifth of the population. The resulting rubber revenues temporarily saved the EIC, but only until rubber prices collapsed. Still, the preservation of the EIC meant the preservation of its life-saving interventions against disease, tribal war, slavery, and grinding poverty that had bedeviled the region since recorded time.

The rubber quotas imposed on natives in this 15 percent of the territory were enforced by native soldiers working for the companies or for the EIC itself. In many areas, the rubber came with ease and the natives prospered. The rubber station at Irengi, for instance, was known for its bulging stores and hospitable locals, whose women spent a lot of time making bracelets and where “no one ever misses a meal,” noted the EIC soldier George Bricusse in his memoirs. Elsewhere, however, absent direct supervision, and with the difficulties of meeting quotas greater, some native soldiers engaged in abusive behavior to force the collection. Bricusse noted these areas as well, especially

where locals had sabotaged rubber stations and then fled to the French Congo to the north. In rare cases, native soldiers kidnapped women or killed men to exact revenge. When they fell into skirmishes, they sometimes followed long-standing Arab and African traditions by cutting off the hands or feet of the fallen as trophies, or to show that the bullets they fired had been used in battle. How many locals died in these frays is unclear, but the confirmed cases might put the figure at about 10,000, a terrible number.

The abuses were first reported by an American missionary in *The Times* of London in 1895 and quickly brought Léopold's censure: "If there are these abuses in the Congo, we must stop them," he warned EIC officials in 1896. "If they continue, it will be the end of the state." For the next ten years, reforming the Congo's rubber industry absorbed an inordinate amount of attention in the British and American press and legislatures, not to mention within Belgium and the EIC itself, leading to formal Belgian colonization in 1908.

Hochschild thus takes a very limited, unintentional, unforeseen, and perhaps unavoidable problem of native-on-native conflict over rubber harvesting and blows it up into a "forgotten Holocaust" to quote the subtitle given to the French edition of his book. Inside this great invention are many more perfidious Russian dolls.

First, in what might charitably be described as a puzzling instance of creative editing, Hochschild takes the testimony of an EIC officer *against* rubber harvesting and turns it into a call *for* rubber atrocities. This little dodge forms a cornerstone of his argument that chopped hands for rubber was "deliberate policy" and "officially sanctioned." The speaker is Charles Lemaire, who was the first commissioner of the Équateur district and whose memoirs are held at the University of Ghent. The original quotation reads:

> ***Lors qu'il fut question de caoutchouc, je m'y refusai et écrivis au Gouvernement: "Pour faire du caoutchouc dans le district de l'Équateur, (où nulle preparation n'avait été faite), il faudra couper des mains, des nez et des oreilles, et je ne sache pas que***

> ***nous ayons chassé les bandits arabes pour nous substituer à eux."***

My own translation would render it:

> ***As soon as the rubber question was raised, I stood firmly in opposition and wrote to the government: "We will have to be cutting off hands, noses, and ears if we intend to collect rubber in the Équateur district (where no preparations had been made). And I don't think we drove away the Arab bandits in order to take their place."***

As even the anti-Léopold historian Daniel Vangroenweghe noted, Lemaire, like most EIC officials, was unwilling and unable to pursue a systematic rubber harvest: "He didn't have the time and he understood that it would not work without the use of force." Hochschild, however, creatively edits the quotation to say the opposite:

> ***As soon as it was a question of rubber, I wrote to the government, "To gather rubber in the district…one must cut off hands, noses and ears."***

This is such a reckless act of dishonesty that one can only marvel. Let's proceed to the next cheat. Most memorably for readers, Hochschild reprints staged photographs taken by the English missionary Alice Seeley Harris and supplied to the anti-Léopold campaign through the English missionary John Weeks. The missionaries knew that showing these fake photos at "lantern shows" in community halls in Britain won more attention and donations than their detailed accounts of cannibalism and sleeping sickness ravaging their areas. Hochschild does not tell the reader that the photographs are staged, nor does he explain that the photographs of people with severed hands were victims of gangrene, tribal vendettas, or cannibalism having nothing to do with rubber. In the most famous photo of them all, a man whom Seeley got to sit on the veranda of her mission station with a severed hand and foot before him, the original caption given by Morel reads: "Sala of Wala and remains of his five year old daughter; both wife and child were eaten by king's soldiers at a cannibal feast."

Until Hochschild, no one had suggested that the girl or her mother were killed for rubber, only that the EIC had failed to control the eating habits of its citizens. Hochschild, however, captions the photo thus: “Nsala, of the district of Wala, looking at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter, Boali, a victim of the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company (A.B.I.R.) militia.”

This is like saying someone killed by a person who works for Boeing is “a victim of the Boeing labor union.” It is chicanery, plain and simple.

Third, as a self-proclaimed human rights activist, Hochschild can be forgiven for his economic illiteracy. But since it is the keystone that begins his tale, it is another fib worth correcting. The EIC’s large trade surplus (more physical goods going out than coming in) was because virtually none of the revenue from the goods sold in Europe was sent back to pay for labor, which was “paid for” as a fulfillment of the EIC labor obligation. Instead, the revenue paid for European administration, infrastructure, and trade services in the Congo as well as profits that were parked in Belgium (an overall payments deficit). For Hochschild to claim that Africans were getting “little or nothing” for the goods they produced because fewer *goods* were being sent to Africa displays a stunning economic ignorance. It is like saying that the empty container ships returning to China from today’s port of Long Beach show that China’s workers are being paid “little or nothing.”

Fourth, the big headline of the book, a whopper really, is Hochschild’s claim that the population of the Congo fell by 50 percent or 10 million on Léopold’s watch. The EIC, he claims, caused “depopulation” and “mass murder” of “genocidal proportions” due to its drive for rubber profits. In fact, the most knowledgeable estimates today suggest that the general population of the Congo *rose* slightly during the EIC era and that any deaths attributable to the limited abuses in the rubber areas were far outweighed by the lives saved and created by the EIC’s direct interventions in other respects. Even if we can agree that any life lost to senseless violence and negligent governance is always and everywhere deserving of condemnation, Léopold’s regime

was a monumental achievement in saving and promoting black lives.

How could Hochschild go so wrong? He was highly motivated from the start to "find" a genocide because, as he notes, his project began by reading the American humorist Mark Twain's claim that eight to ten million people had died in the EIC. But no scholar has *ever* made such a charge. His source was a chapter by the Belgian ethnographer Jan Vansina, citing his own work on population declines in the *entirety* of central Africa *throughout* the 19th century that included *only* what became the northern areas of the EIC. In any case, Vansina's own source was a Harvard study of 1928 that quoted a 1919 Belgian claim that "in some areas" population had fallen by half, but quoted it in order to assert that it was *almost certainly false*.

The first proper sample-based census was not carried out until 1949, so demographers have to reconstruct population totals from micro-level data on food supply, settlement patterns, village counts, birth records, and the like. The most sophisticated modeling by French and Belgian demographers variously suggests a population of 8 to 11 million in 1885 and 10 to 12 million by 1908. The Belgian Jean-Paul Sanderson, using a backward projection method by age cohorts, found a slight decline, from 10.5 million in 1885 to 10 million in 1910. This estimated change in total population governed by changing birth and death rates over a 25 year period represents a negligible annual net decline in population.

Even taking Sanderson's pessimistic estimate as correct, does this mean that Léopold's rule "killed" 500,000 people? Of course not, because, in addition to the misplaced personalization of long-term population changes, the rubber regions, as mentioned, experienced both population increases and declines. Even in the latter, such as the rubber-producing Bolobo area in the lower reaches of the Congo river, population decline was a result of the brutalities of freelance native chiefs and ended with the arrival of an EIC officer. More generally, the stability and enforced peace of the EIC caused birth rates to rise near EIC centers, such as at the Catholic mission under EIC

protection at Baudouinville (today's Kirungu). Population declines were in areas *outside* of effective EIC control. The modest population gains caused by EIC interventions were overwhelmed by a range of wholly separate factors, which in order of importance were: the slave trade, sleeping sickness, inter-tribal warfare, other endemic diseases (smallpox, beriberi, influenza, yellow fever, pneumonia, dysentery, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and venereal disease), cannibalism, and human sacrifice.

Hochschild in a sense knows he will be called out on this, and thus rolls out the fudge that "although outright murder was not the major cause of death," the most important determining factor of demographic trends in the entire territory was the "finding and using" of labor for rubber and other devious endeavors like building railways. Again, this is simply untenable and has never been advanced by any reputable scholar. Even more, it is an insult to Congolese who fought against native tyrants and slavers alongside the EIC. As the anthropologist Michael Singleton noted: "The condition of African populations resulted primarily from the demographic strategies of those whose lives were at stake, and not from the interventions, well or ill-intentioned, of foreigners."

How could Hochschild go so wrong?

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Why did Hochschild put such store in plainly erroneous data about a loss of life caused by the EIC? Here we come to the horror at the heart of King Hochschild's Hoax: his attempt to equate the EIC to the Nazis and to the sacred memory of the Holocaust. Throughout the book there is a nauseating, indeed enraging, use of Holocaust and Auschwitz comparisons. In part these reveal an insecurity about his main thesis and the knowledge that one way to silence criticism is to play on the fact that no one wants to be called a Holocaust denier. While we know "how many Jews the Nazis put to death," he menaces readers, insisting on such precision in the EIC is distasteful. You have been warned!

The strategy works. In reviewing *Léopold II: Un Roi Génocidaire?*, *a* 2005 defense of the EIC by the Belgian

historian Michel Dumoulin, the emeritus Boston University professor Edouard Bustin wrote malevolently: “Dumoulin is waging a futile—and somewhat unsavory—battle that is bound to ring like revisionist versions of the Holocaust.”

The further falsehoods and distortions that make up King Hochschild’s Hoax all collectively derive from the problems above. Perhaps most remarkably, the book is not really much about the history of the EIC at all. The central activity that justified, motivated, absorbed, and in the end defeated the EIC is missing: the battle against the Afro-Arab slave trade. This is akin to writing a history of the 68 years of colonial Kenya that limits itself only to the eight years of Mau Mau counter-insurgency campaign.

Again, Hochschild wearily mentions the efforts to end slavery at the outset, but merely in order to sneer at them as “dubious” because of prior European involvement in the slave trade. He mocks the EIC’s campaigns against the “dastardly” slavers, as if they are noble proto-nationalists, and he fawns over the notorious slaver Tippu Tip as “handsome, bearded, strongly built” as well as “shrewd” and “resourceful” with “administrative acumen.”

Belgium had no prior history in the slave trade, nor of African slaves. Léopold could fight against slavery without *any* hint of hypocrisy, even of the ahistorical type advanced by Hochschild. And it was slavery, not rubber operations, that contemporary observers viewed as the biggest threat to the people of the Congo. The missionary Fanny Emma Fitzgerald Guinness was allowed to visit one Arab slave fort in 1890, seeing “rows upon rows of dark nakedness, relieved here and there by the white dresses of the captors” in one pen holding 2,300 souls. She estimated that for every one slave eventually sold, *seven* died either in the raids, in the camps, or while being transported to the Indian Ocean. In 1892, a Belgian trader and his entire caravan of six Europeans and 40 porters were beheaded by a thug controlled by the notorious slaver and warlord Msiri, who asked that their heads be returned to him to decorate his compound. The trader had tried to persuade Msiri and other local tyrants to sell their ivory to his company, which could transport it by river, thus obviating the need for slaves.

The black American missionary George Washington Williams, visiting in 1890, noted “the most revolting crimes” committed by the natives: “Human hands and feet and limbs, smoked and dried, are offered and exposed for sale in many of the native village markets. From the mouth of the Lomami-River to Stanley-Falls there are thirteen armed Arab camps; and in them I have seen many skulls of murdered slaves pendant from poles and over these camps floating their blood-red flag.” Oddly, Hochschild quotes Williams’ testimony against native practices to criticize the EIC for being insufficiently vigorous in its attempts to govern the territory. Heads I win, tails you lose.

As this logical slip implies, a justifiably proportionate response to the scourge of the slave trade required keen efforts by the EIC to recruit and feed soldiers, clear villages in areas prone to slave raids, establish military and governance posts, and pursue slave armies to the death. “Accommodating the Arab slave traders would be a crime,” wrote the EIC captain, and later WWI hero, Jules Jacques de Dixmude in 1892.

Tacking his boat back in the direction of the EIC being *too* vigorous, Hochschild transposes EIC efforts *against slavery* into cruel efforts *for rubber*. The reader is lured into believing that every conflict he documents is about the drive for rubber, not the drive against slavery (or inter-tribal vendettas). One of many egregious examples will have to suffice.

Hochschild describes the EIC official Léon Fiévez as a “sadist” who “terrorized” the rubber-rich Équateur district where he was commissioner. His source is the George Bricusse mentioned above. Bricusse lasted only three years in the Congo before dying of either typhoid or malaria, a common occurrence for the EIC where the *annual* mortality rate for European soldiers was 20 percent. In the 1894 incident recalled, Fiévez is recounting to Bricusse his desperate attempts to feed his soldiers while battling slave lords in the area. There is no mention of rubber because this particular place had little of it. The slaving business, on the other hand, is flourishing and Bricusse notes its devastation everywhere. Fiévez had arrived a few days earlier and held parlay with local chiefs. They had agreed to

supply his soldiers with food for payment. They then reneged and fled into the forest. Fiévez sent his troops in pursuit and, in the ensuing fight, 100 of the chiefs' soldiers were killed. After that, the chiefs made good on their promise.

"In the face of their manifest ill will, I do battle with them," Fiévez explains to Bricusse. "One example was enough: one hundred heads cut off and there have been plenty of supplies at the station ever since." Hochschild has redacted the cause of the battle and implies that the "them" are hapless villagers who failed to turn over rubber. He has also removed the context. Fiévez is correct that these hundred battle fatalities saved the lives of his 500 troops who are on the verge of starvation. More generally, these 500 troops are eliminating a trade that is taking thousands of lives every year in the district. As Fiévez explains in the intervening sentence (removed by Hochschild): "Slavery still occurs on a vast scale. However, it is very difficult to eradicate it. Certain populations even unearth the corpses and eat them. Sacrifices still take place on the death of a chief or on the advice of witch doctors."

Hochschild's editorial motives are clear. He wants to set up the next quotation from Fiévez: "My goal is ultimately humanitarian." We are supposed to roll our eyes with knowing derision. If we know the full story, we will feel manipulated by Hochschild instead. Fiévez *was* a humanitarian it turns out, and his actions were justified.

Take the Fiévez example and multiply it by two dozen and you have a good idea of how King Hochschild's Hoax operates.

My allotted space dwindles, but I must point out three additional aspects of the blarney that is *King Leopold's Ghost*, which, while less central, are more revealing for the dark arts being practiced.

Hochschild is at pains to convince the reader that anyone opposing the EIC was good, whether brutal slave trader, inveterate cannibal, fetish priest, or ethnic-cleansing warlord. His treatment of the 1895 rebellion by native soldiers at a military camp named Luluabourg in the

southern savannah strains to portray the rebels as noble savages pining for freedom and a return to pastoral life. In his telling, the Belgian commander Mathieu Pelzer was a "bully" who "used his fists" and thus got his comeuppance at breakfast with a knife to the throat. Actually, Pelzer had nothing to do with it. The rebels were former soldiers for a black slave king. The EIC had brought them to the southern camp to reintegrate them as government soldiers. But their loss of royal prerogatives to whore, steal, and maim caused them to rebel. The group never exceeded 300 (Hochschild speculates that it reached 2,500) and petered out in the northern jungles in 1897, a rag-tag criminal gang gone to seed.

This egregious example of "Belgians bad, natives good" is the conceptual foundation of King Hochschild's Hoax. And it bleeds into what is, for most readers, the enduring imaginative impact of the book, to have put a nasty Belgian face onto Mistah Kurtz, the phantom who draws Marlow's steamboat up the Congo river in Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella *Heart of Darkness*. Like generations of English professors, Hochschild has misread the book as an indictment of colonialism, which is difficult to square with its openly pro-colonial declarations and the fact of the "adoring" natives surrounding the deceased Kurtz.

Conrad spent six months working for a cargo company in the EIC in 1890, three weeks of it aboard a steamship traveling up river to today's Kisangani. There is no mention of rubber in the novel because Conrad was there five years before rubber cultivation began. Kurtz is an ivory trader. So whatever sources Conrad was using when he began work on *Heart of Darkness* in 1898, his personal experiences would at most have added some color and context. Hochschild will have none of it, insisting that Conrad "saw the beginnings of the frenzy of plunder and death" which he then "recorded" in *Heart of Darkness.* The brutalities by whites in the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* were inspired by the novel, Hochschild avers, because Conrad "had seen it all, a century earlier, in the Congo." In another example of creative chronology, Hochschild cites a quotation that he believes was the inspiration for Kurtz's famous scrawl, "Exterminate all the brutes!" The quotation was made public for the first time during a Belgian legislative debate

in 1906. Whatever its authenticity, it could not be a source for a book published in 1902.

Mere quibbling, you say. The main point is that Conrad realistically described the terrible things done by Belgians in the Congo. Hochschild certainly wishes this was Conrad's purpose. He repeats an old theory that Kurtz was based on the EIC officer Léon Rom whom Conrad "may have met" in 1890 and "almost certainly" read about in 1898. Visitors noted that Rom's garden was decorated with polished skulls buried in the ground, the garden gnomes of the Congo then. But Kurtz's compound has no skulls buried in the ground but rather freshly severed "heads on the stakes" that "seemed to sleep at the top of that pole." As the British scholar Johan Adam Warodell notes, none of the "exclusively European prototypes" for Kurtz advanced by woke professors and historians followed this native mode of landscape gardening. By contrast, *dozens* of accounts of African warlords and slavers in the Congo published before 1898 described rotting heads on poles ("a wide-reaching area marked by a grass fence, tied to high poles, which at the very top were decorated with grinning, decomposing skulls," as one 1888 account had it).

Far from being "one of the most scathing indictments of [European] imperialism in all literature," as Hochschild declares it, *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most scathing indictments of the absence of European imperialism in all literature. Kurtz is a symbol of the pre-colonial horrors of the Congo, horrors that the EIC, however fitfully, was bringing to an end.

Disagree if you like, and feel free to consult the extensive archives and records left behind, which provide constant fodder for the global industry of EIC critics. Hochschild repeats the urban legend that Léopold burned all the EIC documents, going "to extraordinary lengths to try to erase potentially incriminating evidence." Quite the opposite: Léopold was proud of the EIC and went to extraordinary lengths to leave behind an extensive record. The testimony of his military aide that Hochschild cites about "burning the State archives" and turning "most of the Congo state records to ash" was a misunderstanding: what the aide saw burning were ruined and unreadable papers among the

thousands of documents that came back in crates from the Congo in 1908. Léopold left behind 14 trunks filled with his personal letters and financial statements. Everything was carefully cataloged in “a vast room that looked like a post office,” the aide recalled. Some of it went missing in the turmoil of World War II before resurfacing in the basement of a house in 1983. Just last year, researchers at the Royal Museum for Central Africa who work on the EIC archives published a new book, *The Congo Free State: What Could Archives Tell Us?*

Still, one wonders if Léopold *should have* burned all the EIC archives given the malicious craft practiced by Hochschild and others like him. For all our modernist beliefs in truth, evidence, logic, and fairness, perhaps we have reached a point of no return in the writing of history where modern progressives attack the historical record with malice aforethought, leaving us stupider than we were before this movement took shape in the 1960s, when the twentysomething Hochschild was at the barricades protesting Vietnam and all the rest.

It is for future generations to re-colonize history using the precious intellectual resources of the Enlightenment. Until then, we do well to fight the progressive warlords like Hochschild who enslave formerly colonized peoples in distorted victimization narratives that rob them of agency, all the while keeping the white man front and center.

The Ghost Still Haunts

Adam Hochschild responds to Bruce Gilley, who follows in kind.

By Adam Hochschild & Prof. Dr. Bruce Gilley
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have many points of disagreement, to put it mildly, with Bruce Gilley's lengthy diatribe against my book, *King Leopold's Ghost* ("King Hochschild's Hoax," April 17, 2023).

First, a matter of terminology. Prof. Gilley declares that my "central lie," my "first and biggest deceit," is to equate the *État independant du Congo*, the regime King Leopold II of Belgium controlled for 23 years, with colonialism. Is Gilley not aware of Britain's India Company, the Dutch East India Company, and other such entities? Just like the government-controlled colonial regimes that seamlessly supplanted them, they issued regulations, conscripted forced laborers, built prisons, and deployed police and soldiers, all for the major purpose of extracting wealth. When the Belgian government took over the administration of the Congo from Leopold's *État independent* and it became the Belgian Congo, numerous officials of the king's personal regime continued in the same or similar posts in the new one. This is noted many times in the quasi-official encyclopedia of personnel who worked for both regimes, the *Biographie coloniale belge.* Belgians who sought their fortunes in Africa under Leopold boasted of their conquests in the magazine, *La Belgique coloniale.* When he died, Leopold was building a World School of Colonialism to train more such men. He and they would be startled to find his Congo state not considered a colony.

The clearest sign of the devastating effect of Leopold's rule, and its immediate aftermath, while the forced labor system he devised continued, was the territory's dramatic loss of population. Although tens of thousands of people were killed outright or died in rebellions against his regime, a vastly larger part of the loss had to do with the side effects of forced labor. When the able-bodied men of a community are conscripted as gatherers of wild rubber, and their wives are chained up as hostages to keep the men at work, people stop having children. Under such circumstances, communities also have great difficulty cultivating and harvesting enough food, and so disease took a terrible toll on a population weakened by well-documented near-famine. Those who tried to flee the forced labor regime

often had nowhere to go but deep in the rainforest, where there was little food or shelter, and they died. And many conquests—as when Europeans arrived in the Americas—often spread illnesses to which the local population has no immunity.

Prof. Gilley claims, astonishingly, that during the king's rule the population of the territory actually rose. He cites one writer who makes this assertion, and says other unnamed "French and Belgian demographers" back it up. Most scholars, however, would consider this nonsense. No one can know, of course, accurate population figures from an era before there was a census, but many officials on the ground at the time and later historians, demographers, and anthropologists have made estimates of great loss. In *King Leopold's Ghost*, I cited a number of these for the period from 1880 to 1920. (Things began to improve around 1920, when Belgian colonial authorities realized that if they did not lessen the harshness of the forced labor system, they would soon have no labor force left.)

In those four decades, the colonial government's own *Commission Permanente pour la Protection des Indigènes* later reckoned that the population had "been reduced by half." Concurring in that estimate, in an interview with me, was the late historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina, a leading authority in the field of African studies, who devoted his entire career to studying the peoples of the Congo River basin. (Gilley ignores my source note, and claims Vansina was talking about something else, in a book.) Vansina repeated the estimate in the documentary film made from my book. Prof. Vansina very generously also read the manuscript of *King Leopold's Ghost*, and I incorporated dozens of his suggestions and corrections.

Many other scholars similarly estimate an immense loss of population in the Congo in the Leopold period and its immediate aftermath. The demographer Léon de St. Moulin says that it declined "by at least a third, possibly by half." The historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem sets the total loss at 10 million in his *Histoire du Congo: Des origins à la Republique Démocratique*. (The latest edition of his book, incidentally, is published by Belgium's Royal Museum for

Central Africa, an institution Leopold founded, with a forward by the museum's director.)

On another point: *King Leopold's Ghost* reproduces some of the photographs of Congo atrocities that fueled the worldwide protests against Leopold's rule during the first decade of the twentieth century. These "fake photos," Gilley declares, were "staged" by the photographer. Yes, some images appear posed—something true of most photos everywhere in an era when cameras were bulky contraptions on tripods whose subjects had to remain still for a few seconds. But does Gilley really think that the British Baptist missionary Alice Harris put Congolese women in chains so that she could take pictures of them, pretending that they were hostages? Other photos in this era, from another part of the colony, by the African photographer Hezekiah Andrew Shanu, also show people in chains. The Belgian diplomat-scholar Jules Marchal has found abundant evidence in his country's archives of local officials ordering large quantities of chains. The regime's own *Manuel du Voyageur et du Résident au Congo*, has detailed instructions for state officials about how to take hostages. Was that entire multivolume manual something faked by Leopold's enemies?

Colonialism is but one form of the endless cycles of conquest that have defined human history. Conquest spreads things both good and bad: from languages, alphabets, and technologies to tools of war, torture, and enslavement. And sometimes decent people can be embedded even in a system focused on the latter. There certainly were some in Leopold's Congo, like the magistrate Stanislas Lefranc, who boldly, but in vain, wrote pamphlets and articles protesting the regime's profligate use against its subjects of the brutal rhinoceros-hide whip, the *chicotte*. Or like the three judges appointed by the king to an investigative commission in 1904-05, which, among other things, noted the dramatic decline in population. The verbatim testimony of eyewitnesses about the forced labor regime before this commission was so damaging that Leopold suppressed it totally, and successive Belgian governments kept it locked away from outside view for more than 60 years. Gilley ignores witnesses like these,

implying that the regime's critics were all foreigners with nefarious motives of their own.

Prof. Gilley's view of colonialism is fundamentally different from mine, but he is entitled to it. Assessing colonialism's impact thoughtfully, however, is a subtle and complex business. It should involve carefully examining why, by measures of social and economic well-being, some former colonies appear today far better off (Botswana, for example) than they were in the colonial era, while others, like Congo, are worse off. It should examine how the fate of various territories was affected by the nature and extent of education systems, land ownership, what kind of cash crops the colonizers wanted cultivated, and whether they were harvested by small farmers or by forced labor. It should examine what kind of societies colonial regimes replaced, with no illusions that these were all lost paradises. There is a worthwhile discussion to be had here. But it's not one I wish to continue with someone who accuses me of perpetrating "a vast hoax," filled with "deceit," "falsehoods," and "dark arts" that is nothing more than "narcissistic guilt porn." That is the voice of an intemperate polemicist, not of a serious scholar.

Furthermore, however rosy—or critical—one's view of any system is, no one should ever take everything its officials say at face value. To do so is not a matter of honest disagreement about the benefits and damages of colonialism; it is simply being naïve. That naïveté is at the root of most of what Gilley has to say about *King Leopold's Ghost*. Gilley appears to be duped by Leopold's pretense that it was to "eliminate endemic Arab slave empires and African tribal wars"—rather than for the making of an enormous fortune—that he colonized the Congo. Leopold was remarkably successful in that charade for much of his lifetime, but it's a surprise that anyone should still believe his well-spun myths more than a century after his death.

Gilley similarly assumes that lower officials of the regime were all altruistic, well-meaning, and truthful, caring benevolently for the native inhabitants and conscript troops under their control. He quotes military officer George Bricusse describing a happy rubber-gathering station where the women make bracelets and "no one ever misses a

meal." Amazingly, he defends another official, Léon Fiévez, as having the best of motives even when he boasted of cutting off a hundred heads.

These men were soldiers of fortune, anything but humanitarians. Bricusse in his diary describes his pleasure at feeling no distress when he watches the hanging of an African he had ordered. Fiévez was recorded as receiving 1,308 severed hands—proof of his troops' triumph over rebels—in a single day. Are such men reliable witnesses, with only good intentions?

Gilley is right, however, that I was misleading in respect to one quotation I cited from another official, Charles Lemaire. I am sorry about that and it should be corrected. Lemaire was a more complicated case. His early diaries, which I quote elsewhere in the book, unroll a lengthy list of villages he ordered burned to the ground and a triumphant roster of death tolls: "20 natives killed" here, "around 15 blacks killed" there, and many more such boasts. But later in life, to his credit, Lemaire had deep regrets, and in fairness to him I should have referred to them. He wrote, for example, of his role in the colonization Gilley so admires, "My African education began in rifle and cannon shots, in burning of villages...in a word, in abuse and overabuse....I reread my first reports with horror."

Bruce Gilley replies:

Adam Hochschild has enjoyed a long run of success with *King Leopold's Ghost*, his distortionary 1998 tale about the *État Indépendant du Congo* (EIC). So long, in fact, that he appears unable to come clean about its many fabrications. It is not just the doctoring of the quotation that anchors the story of "chopped hands for red rubber" (which I am grateful he has admitted), but the vast skein of distortion in which that little dodge is embedded.

Most centrally, how did approximately 10,000 people killed in skirmishes between the EIC police and natives in a small portion of the territory over a 20-year period mushroom into 10 million dead, "mass murder on a vast scale" and "a forgotten Holocaust"? Rather than climb down from this ludicrous claim, which the doyen of Congo studies, Jean Stengers, called "absurd" and "polemical," Hochschild

repeats it. His source? The same Jan Vansina whose work, I noted, was based on an erroneous reading of an earlier report (a Harvard study that *rejected* the report of the Permanent Committee for the Protection of the Natives of 1919 that Hochschild cites in his letter) and whose own work was based on nothing more than “oral traditions.”

In any case, Hochschild seems unaware that Vansina later explicitly rejected his earlier conclusion. In his 2010 book on the Kuba people, *Being Colonized*, Vansina said he was “misled” about population decline (pp. 145-147). Rubber and military operations by the EIC were negligible factors, he later admitted. Disease was the main factor driving population down, brought by both Arab and Western incursions into Central Africa as well as by Congolese traveling farther afield. His earlier “50% decline” claim was an “erroneous conclusion.” The Kuba population had been artificially swelled by the importation of slave women before and in the early years of the EIC. These women were serially raped to boost the population, which peaked in 1899. In 1910 all slaves were freed by the Belgians, so the population plummeted since most fled. Porters returning from the Great War introduced new diseases, pushing the population lower still. “The Kuba population was actually rising rather than falling during the first two decades of the colonial era,” he concluded. “The decline began with the [EIC] conquest in 1900 and then continued to 1919.” Conflicts with the EIC contributed only a small fraction to the estimated population decline by 1919 of 25 percent, perhaps a fifth. Most resulted from local diseases and slave emancipation, followed by global epidemics from the Great War.

Hochschild is correct that the demographer Léon de St. Moulin assayed the 50 percent decline possibility (in 1987 and 1990 works). But Hochschild fails to mention that Moulin, like the later Vansina, believed that the EIC and rubber had nothing to do with it. The causes for Moulin were, in order, sleeping sickness, smallpox, Spanish flu, and venereal diseases. Moulin did not even *mention* the EIC or rubber in his 1990 chapter. Like the later Vansina, he recognized that these were footnotes in the demographic history of the Congo.

As for the claims by the Congolese historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem ("13 million killed" in 1998, then "5 to 10 million killed" in 2008), they are hard to keep track of. Initially, the starting year for his assertions was 1880 (five years before the EIC was founded and ten years before any rubber harvesting) while the latter estimate extended the end year to 1930 (22 years after the EIC). A second edition of the latter estimate, without explanation, moved up the starting date to 1885. Ndaywel cites no data or methods. All three editions of his book merely cite Moulin. It is notable that in a lengthy essay on the EIC published in *L'Histoire* in 2020, Ndaywel no longer makes any specific population claims, asserting only that the effects of the EIC were "worse than grim" ("*plus que macabres*"). In the end, Ndaywel is not credible. His works are published by the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium because he is black. This helps them to "decolonize Eurocentric narratives," which means using blacks as shadow puppets to shield their radical accounts from criticism.

By contrast, dozens of serious demographers and statisticians—not just the Jean-Paul Sanderson I mention—have concluded the overall population rose slightly or was unchanged at around 8 to 10 million from 1885 to 1908. Others include Bruce Fetter, Guy Vanthemsche, Jean-Luc Vellut, Pierre-Luc Plasman, Anatole Romaniuk, and, as mentioned, the later Jan Vansina. Taken on its own, the EIC was a positive influence on the black population in the Congo because of its campaigns against slavery, endemic tribal warfare, cannibalism, and polygamous rape and torture. Infrastructure and trade brought life-saving income. Population remained unchanged only because of the persistence of endemic disease and slavery. According to Romaniuk, venereal disease alone can explain the depression of population growth after 1900 when the EIC had finally brought a modicum of peace and prosperity to the region.

Let's move to other issues. Hochschild insists on calling the EIC an example of "colonialism", stretching the term beyond its meaning. European colonies were governed by and accountable to the institutions of a liberal state at home. That was the fundamental structural fact of a European colony, meaning the characteristic that explains

its behavior. This fundamental fact was absent from the EIC. This explains its evolution and eventual takeover by Belgium. The EIC was a second-best solution to the *absence* of colonialism. Hochschild will have none of it because his intention all along was to use his tale as an indictment of European colonialism ("A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa", as the subtitle put it). A fevered ideological agenda does not collapse a valid conceptual distinction.

Comparing the EIC to the Nazis is grotesque. Hochschild has nothing to say about this odious rhetorical maneuver, an insult not just to Jews but to the Congolese who fought and remained loyal to the memory of the EIC. Referring to my essay as "polemical" in defense of a book that makes regular references to Auschwitz is rich indeed.

Hochschild's sweet reason in his letter on the complex question of European colonialism appears to have abandoned him while writing the book (or is newfound). "Communism, Fascism, and European colonialism each asserted the right to totally control its subjects' lives," he wrote grandly in the book. How is it possible that he now writes about the "subtle and complex business" of assessing colonialism?

I am glad that Hochschild admits that the photographs in his book are fake. Still, to his point, I do not doubt that the traditional African hippo whip was used by EIC officials. Nor do I doubt that chains were used to confine prisoners in the EIC when prisons were not available. Nor do I doubt that the Arab tradition of chopping off the hands of fallen enemies persisted well into the EIC era, even among natives employed by the government or concession companies. So what? If Hochschild's argument is that the area should have been colonized from the start (as his hero Edmund Morel argued), I would agree. If his argument is that the EIC should have been financed by liquor imports or village hut taxes rather than the 40 hours per month labor requirement for those who could not pay individual taxes, I will side with the King.

I wish that Hochschild would come clean on the litany of other errors I catalogue in my essay: Conrad could not have seen any of the alleged rubber atrocities; Léopold did not burn his archives, and nothing was "locked away from

outside view”; Kurtz’s head-strewn compound was not based on a Belgian official but on African warlords; Léon Fiévez’s African troops killed 100 warriors of local tribal chiefs who had reneged on a promise to supply food, not 100 hapless villagers who failed to turn in rubber; the trade surplus of the EIC reflected payments that went for infrastructure, administration, and security, not a slave economy.

As I wrote, despite the malicious craft practiced by Hochschild and others, I am glad that an extensive documentary record of the EIC and of European colonies more generally survives, not that I expect any honest use of them in our current moral panic. Hochschild was merely an early entry into a genre that has since blossomed into an industry of scholars who “interrogate” the archives to cough up evidence of the evils of the West. There is of course no such documentary record of the horrific conditions the Europeans replaced, and in any case most Western readers would not buy a book on endemic venereal disease in Africa or stool disputes among the Kuba. A salacious tale on the Belgian king and his mistresses torturing black people to pay for their follies? Now you’re talking!

I also do not begrudge Hochschild his millions, although, unlike him, I have untold praise for the capitalist system that produced them (he recently compared Amazon warehouses to slave plantations and in a 2016 book he lamented the failure of a socialist revolution in Spain). But to write history requires an immersion in the context, constraints, and worldviews of those involved. Hochschild just can’t seem to get over the fact that life was very, very different long ago. I, for one, am less ready to leap to condemnation for the petty abuses of the EIC, especially against people who are no longer alive to defend themselves. If he wants to join the Congo Reform Movement, so be it. It has been going on for over 100 years and is not likely to stop. When I call this white guilt porn, I do not intend it as polemic, but merely description.

Much is at stake. In giving Hochschild its Theodore Roosevelt-Woodrow Wilson Award in 2008, the American Historical Association claimed that *King Leopold’s*

Ghost "broke through one of the most impenetrable silences of history" by revealing the "mass death" and "rampant atrocities" in the EIC. Be reminded that the AHA is the representative of professional historians in the United States, not the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine. The AHA went on to call the book "a key text in the historiography of colonial Africa for college and graduate students."

The AHA and Hochschild are also agreed on the really excellent quality of the *1619 Project*, which Hochschild calls (micro-aggression notwithstanding) "masterful." He has described the writing of history as uncovering "shame." The AHA, warming to the idea, praised Hochschild's "humanist agenda" with its mission "to combat inhumanity." History should have no agenda other than uncovering the truth. It should combat only ignorance about the past. If this is the state of public history in the West, we are in a very bad place indeed.